

An Old Man and A Place

(In Memory of George Bartlett, Sorrento, ME)

I never thought about an old man and a place,
but your absence this summer haunts me
as I look out at this vista you loved:
this cathedral of island and sea,
mist rising like incense to God
and the lobstermen tolling the seasons.

Your raspberry patch has all gone to tangle;
the garden denoted by a tuffet of weeds,
and some stranger's van parked
in front of the cabin where, once,
your old Dodge waited to take you
up to the church at Franklin
where on Friday nights you could get
"the darndest home-cooked bean dinnuh this side of Ellswuth"
and you would pull out of that driveway
regal as a king, with that mouse of a dog, Midget,
whom you called, "Darlin,"
(and seemed to love better than your own children)
riding astride the front and back seats.

This was your plot of earth and sky,
your "heaven," as you called it.
What matter that the price was humiliation:
the wealthy in whose summer residences you sweated
over plumbing and valences
never had the final word.
How you chuckled to recall
the expensive French wallpaper you hung
upside down. "Didn't look no different to me
one way or th'other," you'd say; but the look
of utter horror on Mrs. Chafee's face
when she discovered it! And her having to send
away to Boston for another roll,
and since you were being paid by the hour,

and since there was no hired help to be found
anymore, like old George

A man has a right to a little
plot of heaven: a raspberry patch,
a window on the sea,
a piece of earth for growing beets and zucchini.
And you were always generous with yours—
inviting yourself to dinner
with an armload of greens;
reminiscing about “poor Martha, dead these fifteen years,
sweetest woman that ever lived,”
and the price of water heaters

staying on until we had to be rude.

Your legacy: a fondness in a neighbor’s heart,
this woman you called, “Missus,”
when memory failed;
this poem,
and two small cabins bequeathed to your children
and grandchildren.

Not a whole peninsula,
but a little plot of earth.

An old man, and a place.

~Sheila D. Collins